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ABSTRACT

Research on language acquisition has begun to examine how successful language learners achieve their goals. Teachers and researchers have long noticed that some language learners acquire a second (or third or fourth) language more quickly and more effectively than others. Upon examination, researchers have found that several factors are involved in this difference, such as motivation, attitude, and age. One factor in students' success is their use of learning strategies. Given that learning strategies can be taught, the focus of this paper is to examine the results of attempts to teach learning strategies to second language learners, and whether the results suggest that there is a best way to carry out learning strategy training. The discussion of teaching language learning strategies has been focused on whether learning strategy training can be separate from subject content or integrated into it, embedded, or addressed directly. Research does not suggest any clear answer on whether learning strategy teaching should be integrated into subject matter or kept separate. There are demonstrable pros and cons to each position. (Contains 12 references.) (KFT)

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Language Learning Strategies: Is There a Best Way to Teach Them?

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In recent years, research on second language acquisition has begun to examine how successful second language learners achieve their goals. Teachers and researchers have long noticed that some language learners acquire a second (or third or fourth) language more quickly and more effectively than other students. Upon examination, researchers have found that several factors are involved in this difference: motivation, attitude, and age among them. One factor in students' success is their use of learning strategies.

In the most general terms, learning strategies are strategies that, in the case of language, help a learner develop a language system (Rubin, 1987). For the purposes of language acquisition, researchers are concerned with learning strategies rather than communication strategies or production strategies which deal with language use (O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper, 1995). Research has been conducted on the nature and identification of learning strategies with the aim of classifying them (Chamot, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper, 1995; Oxford, 1985a, 1990; Rubin, 1987; see also Brown and Palinscar, 1982; Naiman, Frolich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Oxford, 1986; Rubin, 1975 as cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Other research has looked at how learning strategies function in the second language acquisition process, and still other research has taken up the teachability of strategies. Given that learning strategies can be taught, the purpose of this focus paper is to examine the results of attempts to teach learning strategies to second language learners and whether the results suggest that there is a best way to carry out learning strategy training.

Before researchers could develop research studies to find a "best" way and before teachers and materials developers could write effective materials, they had to have a clear concept of what

they were researching or intending to teach. Easier said than done. Different researchers have different terms for the same concept, sometimes define language learning strategies differently and occasionally disagree on which behaviors and processes should in fact be identified as language learning strategies (Wenden, 1987b). O'Malley and Chamot define learning strategies as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (1990, p.1). Rigney (as cited in Oxford, 1989, p. 235) describes them much as one would describe the operations of a computer: "operations or steps used by a learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage or retrieval of information". Wenden's definition is wide-reaching, encompassing not only what learners do to learn and regulate the learning of a second language, but also what learners know about the strategies they use and the factors that make learning a second language easier (Wenden, 1987b). Oxford defines learning strategies as "behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable" (1989, p. 235). Ellis (1994) believes Oxford's definition limits learning strategies to the observable, i.e., behaviors and actions. (Either Ellis's 1994 interpretation of Oxford is too narrow or he missed her work from 1990 because in it Oxford's definition includes unobservable strategies such as planning and organizing [Oxford, 1990].) By contrast, Weinstein and Mayer define learning strategies as "behaviors and thoughts [emphasis added] that a learner engages in during learning." (1986, p. 315). Ellis's own definition includes mental, and therefore unobservable, processes (1994).

Just as different researchers have different definitions of learning strategies, they organize what they see as strategies into different frameworks. According to Oxford (1994), there are

some two dozen strategy classification systems grouped into at least five typologies. Oxford, herself (1985a, 1985b,1989,1990), divides strategies into direct (including memory, cognitive and compensation) and indirect (metacognitive, affective and social) strategies. Chamot (1987) organizes them into three types: cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective, omitting some of the compensation strategies Oxford includes perhaps because they are ways to compensate for not being able to communicate in the target language rather than techniques to achieve linguistic success. Ellis (1994) distinguishes two types of language learning strategy: those that focus on a learner's mastery of the linguistic content of the target language (roughly equivalent to cognitive) and those that focus on the learner's becoming a skilled speaker, listener, reader and writer (roughly equivalent to metacognitive). Rubin (1981 as cited in Rubin, 1987) divides strategies into two primary categories: strategies that affect learning directly and those that affect learning indirectly. Under these are three kinds of strategies: learning strategies (both cognitive and metacognitive), communication strategies (basically what equates to Oxford's "compensation" strategies) and social strategies (Rubin, 1987). Naiman et al. (1978 as cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) organizes strategies into five broad categories.

Even when researchers agree that a particular behavior is a learning strategy, and their respective frameworks include a similar category, they sometimes disagree as to which category it belongs. For example, both Rubin (1981 as cited in Rubin, 1987) and Oxford's (1990) frameworks include a category of indirect strategies. Yet the strategy of "clarification or verification" is assigned to the direct category by Rubin and to the indirect category by Oxford. Chamot (1987) and Rubin (1987) agree that questioning for clarification is a language learning

strategy but Chamot sees it as a social/affective learning strategy because it requires interaction with another person while Rubin sees it as a cognitive learning strategy.

However they organize them, most language learning strategy researchers agree that language learners use behaviors and processes that are cognitive, metacognitve and social/affective and that these contribute directly to language learning. Brown and Palinscar (1982 as cited in Chamot, 1987) recognized groups of cognitive and metacognitve learning strategies in their early research on general learning. Language learning researchers seem to have found the grouping useful and accurate because, despite individual variations in their frameworks, researchers without exception include cognitive and metacognitive categories at one level or another. Later, researchers added the critical category of social/affective strategies.

Rubin defines cognitive strategies as "steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning materials" (1987, p. 23). They tend to be domain-specific and are more related to the type of task in the learning activity (strategies for working math problems, strategies for learning vocabulary, etc...). One of the most straightforward definitions is that cognitive strategies are used by the learner to manipulate the material to be learned (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994).

In simple terms, metacognition is being aware of "our own thinking as we perform specific tasks and then using this awareness to control what we are doing" (Marzano et al., 1988, p. 9). It is knowledge of cognitive processes and self-management of such processes (O'Malley et al., 1983 as cited in Rubin, 1987). Metacognitive learning strategies are used by a learner to plan, monitor and evaluate his learning when he asks himself Where do I want to go?, What do I

want to learn?, and How am I doing? They are generalizable to many different domains such as math, science or social studies (O'Malley, Chamot & Kupper 1995), and they are exemplified by such tasks as setting goals and getting organized. A learner uses metacognitive language learning strategies when he directs the course of his language reception and production (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Such language learning strategies are used to "oversee, regulate or self-direct language learning" (Rubin, 1987, p. 25).

Social strategies refer to activities that expose language learners to opportunities to practice their language with other people (Rubin, 1987) as in cooperative learning. They call for "social mediation" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p. 118). Affective strategies involve exercising emotional control over one's learning such as reducing one's anxiety or making the learning environment more conducive to learning. They help a student focus his attention and maintain his motivation (Jones et al., 1987).

As researchers began to identify and organize language learning strategies, they observed that different students use different sets of processes and behaviors. They also found that not all language learners use their strategies effectively or in the same way. For example, in studies in 1978 and 1980, Cziko compared the reading strategies of French speaking students learning English with the reading strategies of native English speakers (as cited in Devine, 1988, p. 265). Cziko found that advanced English proficiency French students had strategies much closer to the native English speakers than they had to poor English proficiency French students. Such observations have led researchers (Naiman et al., 1978; Reiss, 1985; Rubin, 1975 as cited in Ellis, 1994; and Naiman, Frolich & Todesco, 1975 as cited in Oxford, 1985b) to the conclusion that

there are "good" language learners. In fact, from 1971 to 1981 Rubin conducted research that focused on the strategies of successful learners (Rubin, 1987). Her research confirmed that successful language learners have a wider repertoire of learning strategies and use them in more varied combinations and with greater effectiveness. Based on their observations, Chamot and Kupper concluded that "more successful students used learning strategies more often, more appropriately, with greater variety, and in ways that helped them complete the task successfully" (1989, p. 17). On the other hand, less successful language learners are more likely to choose an inappropriate strategy for a particular task (Marzano, et al.,1988). This descriptive phase of research into language learning strategies paved the way for the question of whether the strategies used effectively by good language learners could be taught to good benefit for less successful language learners.

Many research studies have examined the teachability of language learning strategies and determined that less effective students can learn to use and apply them (Derry & Murphy 1986; O'Malley et al., 1985; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Thomas looked at research by Chamot and O'Malley (1987, 1994) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) that led Thomas to conclude that "when English learners receive instruction with explicit teaching of learning strategies, they become more efficient and effective learners in the second language" (as cited in Collier, 1995, p. 33). In fact, Collier, too, believes that one of a teacher's goals should be to expand the range of students' learning strategies (Collier,1995). Weinstein and Mayer (1986) found strategy training successful for first language learners who were at a higher skill level and at an appropriate level of maturity. O'Malley (1987) conducted the second phase of a two-phase study in part to determine

what influence language learning strategy training had on performance in some selected areas of second language learning. Thompson and Rubin believe successful strategy training has been demonstrated in many investigations (as cited in Oxford, 1994). There is ample evidence for successful training of learning strategies for vocabulary.

If, then, language learning strategies can be taught, how best to teach them? This question has huge implications for curriculum and materials developers and classroom teachers. The discussion seems to be framed in two parts. First, should learning strategy training be separate from subject content or integrated into it? Second, should learning strategy training be embedded or addressed directly? There is, however, some confusion over the use of the terms "separate", "integrated", "embedded" and "direct". What one researcher describes as "integrated" (Wenden, 1987a) is the same as what another calls "embedded" (Derry & Murphy, 1986). What some call "direct" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), others calls "explicit" (Marzano et al., 1988; Oxford, 1989). One researcher describes the dichotomy as "blind" vs. "informed" (Wenden, 1987a) and another as "embedded" vs. "detached" (Derry & Murphy, 1986) rather than "embedded" and "direct". Where one researcher makes a distinction between "integrated" and "embedded" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), another does not (Derry & Murphy, 1986). This will be dealt with by describing the instructional situations and using the term found in most of the literature.

Strategy training is "separate" when it is presented as a separate instructional program. It is a course unto itself and might be called "Study Skills" or "Learning to Learn" or "Learning to Think". In the case of separate, it would probably be designed to apply to all content areas, not language learning alone because learning strategies, especially metacognitive and social/affective

ones and to varying degrees cognitive ones, are applicable to a broad range of tasks and domains. "Integrated" strategy training is that which is offered as part of a regular content area course such as French, algebra, US history or biology. It is combined with and supplementary to the subject matter content. "Embedded" refers to a situation in which students are presented with materials that lead them to use a particular strategy, but are not told why the strategy is being practiced or in what situations it is appropriate to use it. Presumably this method could be found in either a "separate" or "integrated" strategy training program. Finally, in "direct" strategy training, students are explicitly told the how and why of a learning strategy, its value and purpose. Again, presumably, this method could be used in either a "separate" or "integrated" strategy training program.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) describe the question of separate or integrated strategy instruction as an unresolved issue. Advocates of separate strategy training argue that students will learn strategies better if they focus on them exclusively. Their attention will not divided between strategies and content. They also argue that because learning strategies are generalizable to many contexts, it makes sense not to teach them connected to any single content area. Students might be more inclined to transfer strategy use among different domains if they have learned them as domain-independent (Derry & Murphy, 1986). Teaching strategies separately also eliminates the need to train every content teacher in the techniques of teaching strategies. Instead, one teacher could be expertly trained to teach a class such as "Learning to Learn".

In the early 1980's, Weinstein (as cited in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) developed and implemented a separate cognitive strategy training course called Individual Learning Skills. It was

aimed at university students who were taught learning strategies and then practiced applying them to their other courses. Another two separate strategy training approaches were Dansereau's Computer-Assisted Cooperative Learning (CACL) Program developed in the mid 1980's (as cited in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and his MURDER learning strategy system whose acronym stands for various substrategies (Dansereau et al., 1979). In the former, students received and practiced reading comprehension strategies by computer. In the latter, university students were taught strategies in a 37-hour, 15-week course that Dansereau classified as either primary (roughly equivalent to cognitive strategies) and support strategies (roughly equivalent to metacognitive and social/affective strategies) (Dansereau et al., 1979). He found that students later had difficulty transferring the strategies they had learned in the MURDER system to other particular kinds of test material (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Advocates of the integrated approach believe that strategy instruction is most effective when linked to regular language learning activities (Oxford, Lavine & Crookall, 1989). "Study skills can't be taught in isolation [because] they're a bore" (Vuko, 1999, p. C04). When learning strategy training takes place in the context of core subject matter courses semester after semester, students receive realistic content and years of practice. Practicing strategies on authentic academic and language tasks also facilitates strategy transfer to similar tasks in other subject areas (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987). One criticism of the separate approach is that the applicability of strategies taught separately from subject matter may not be immediately evident to the learner (Wenden, 1987a). Thus as regards language learning, strategies should be taught as part of the language course curriculum. Collier believes that the teacher should "consciously [teach] learning

strategies as part of the language acquisition process" (Collier, 1995, p. 33).

One example of an integrated approach is the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program with Learning Strategies (CMLR/LS) (Derry & Murphy, 1986). The program incorporates strategy training into regular reading curriculum materials, and extensive in-service teacher training is considered unnecessary. According to Derry and Murphy the program has been judged a success for several reasons they attribute to it. Student standardized test scores have increased, student absenteeism and discipline problems have declined, post-course reading test scores have increased, and the program has been adopted city-wide. All content teachers, then, become strategy trainers as well.

Another integrated instructional model is the Strategic Teaching Model of B. F. Jones, A.S. Palinscar, D.S. Ogle and E.G. Carr (1987). It is a framework for instruction in content areas, including language learning. It concentrates on instruction in and practice of learning strategies in a specific sequence: determining the students' current strategy use, explaining the target strategy, modeling of the strategy by the teacher and finally student practice of the strategy with gradual lessening of teacher support and prompting.

A third example of integrated language learning strategy training is the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) which was specifically developed for students with limited English proficiency and who need to develop academic language skills in English (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). The curriculum is content-based, e.g. science, math, social studies, and literature, and the subject matter content is the main focus of the instruction. They believe that both learning of academic content and academic language can be facilitated by applying

appropriate learning strategies, and the choice of strategy is determined by the nature of the instructional task and language content. They start with a small number of strategies, pairing them when they are supportive of each other. They aim for strategies and tasks that are only moderately difficult so that students will find the effort worthwhile and experience success.

A compromise approach between integrated and separate strategy instruction is the Job Skills Educational Program (JSEP). In JSEP, separate learning strategy instruction occurs in the context of a core subject-matter course but before an actual subject-matter "learning event". Afterwards, "brief, nonobtrusive promptings to use the previously learned strategies are inserted at appropriate points" (Derry & Murphy, 1986, p. 15).

In the embedded approach to learning strategy instruction, materials are written and activities are presented in such as way that they elicit the use of the particular learning strategy being taught. Students are led to use a particular cognitive strategy by the activity. The strategies are cued by the textbook. Most language learning texts and programs use the embedded approach. They tend to present activities such as prereading preparation for vocabulary or postreading activities such as outlining skills, reading analysis and fact-finding exercises. The foreword to the text, rarely read by students, may explain how these activities are carried out and what they involve, but it rarely explicitly tells the value or purpose of each strategy.

One study of embedded strategy training is reported by Barnett (1988) in which college students were trained in certain reading strategies but were not told the purpose or importance of the strategies. What little improvement the students showed over the control group was not statistically significant. Research on training learning strategies using this approach found that it

resulted in improved performance of the task to which it was tied but later, there was no maintenance or transfer to similar tasks (Wenden, 1987a). In fact, the same lack of transfer to new tasks was found elsewhere (Brown, Armbruster & Baker, 1986). B.F. Jones (1983 as cited in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) claims that the major advantage cited for embedded strategy training is that it requires no teacher training. There is little else to recommend the embedded approach to teaching language learning strategies.

Advocates of the direct approach are numerous: Brown et al. (1986), Palinscar and Brown (1984 as cited in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), Wenden (1987a), Derry and Murphy (1986), Weinstein and Mayer (1986), Marzano et al. (1988), Oxford (1989) and Oxford, Lavine and Crookall, (1989). Derry and Murphy call for "direct expository" instruction because they believe that knowing the how, the why and the when of learning strategy use can facilitate a student's ability to maintain the strategy once outside the training environment. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also conclude that strategy instruction should be direct. Besides improving strategy maintenance, a direct approach will maximize strategy transfer (O'Malley et al., 1985b). Students should be made aware of the strategies they are learning because such awareness will enable them to transfer the strategies to new tasks and move them toward self-directed learning. Marzano et al. (1988) found consistent and strong evidence that most students, but especially low-achieving and younger students, need sustained explicit (i.e., direct) strategy instruction to become skilled learners. According to Oxford (1989; see also Oxford, Lavine & Crookall, 1989), research has demonstrated that the most effective strategy training teaches learners why and how to use new strategies, to evaluate their effectiveness and to decide when it is appropriate to use a particular

strategy in a new situation. Wenden (1987a) says that to teach students what to do but not why or when is to leave students "blind" about a strategy's importance.

Support for the direct approach to teaching language learning strategies is not limited to prominent researchers or materials and curriculum developers. Even individual classroom teachers are on the front line, having discovered the usefulness of explicit strategy training. R. Williams (1985), a classroom ESL teacher, has developed an approach in which he teaches reading strategies directly, using chalk board, overhead project and specially designed teaching materials. His program calls for "high focus" in which he and students examine a reading text together on the overhead projector. He explains the target strategy to the whole class with elaborately marked examples in the text. Students continue in small groups to examine and practice the strategy in specially adapted texts with a few marked examples at first and then gradually move to unmarked texts. Students discuss their reading comprehension and their strategies. Eventually, students combine the strategy with other, previous learned strategies in Williams' second phase of "integrated practice".

On the issue of embedded vs. direct, the verdict seems to be clear: learning strategies and, by extension, language learning strategies should be addressed directly and explicitly. The direct approach makes students aware of their learning strategies, what to do, why they are useful and when it is appropriate to use them. From this, students can work toward becoming autonomous learners, something every teacher should be striving for. There seems to be no benefit to the students for doing otherwise.

On the issue of separate or integrated, the conclusion is less clear. There does not seem to

be the same degree of unanimity as there is on the embedded vs. direct issue. On the one hand, it is less "work" for materials developers and curriculum planners if learning strategies are taught separately. Materials for separate training need only be developed once for a course in learning strategies probably lasting one or two semesters. When strategy instruction is integrated, it must be incorporated into every core course curriculum and text and may need to be reintegrated every time the course curriculum or text changes. The separate method also requires less teacher training. The learning strategies course teacher might be the only one to receive training. There is also the suggestion that separately taught learning strategies transfer more readily than when they have been taught in a domain-specific context.

But what is our goal? If our goal is good teaching, then we must teach students "how to learn, how to remember, how to think and how to motivate themselves" (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986, p. 315). We want our students to become independent and self-directed language learners so that they are capable of continuing their language acquisition outside the classroom and after they have left school. Evidence suggests that students acquire learning strategies more effective when they are integrated into a content curriculum. Every language teacher, and every content teacher, must be instrumental in ensuring that their students learn these strategies and how to transfer them. Additional teacher training and recurring materials development must be the "raised bar" of standards that educators set for themselves.

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